Debates over what constitutes “art” have taken place for as long as art has existed as a discourse in society. Rather than a futile attempt to define ‘what is art?’, this essay aims to offer an overview of two differing views on contemporary practice in the last two decades, and to examine their arguments in relation to each other. Nicholas Bourriaud’s ‘relational aesthetics’ and the YBA’s evolution of Warholian artist-as-brand represent forces that continue to heavily influence art practice today (Gopnik 2012, Goldstein 2012). Considering their claims to be subversive and anti-capitalist against the Stuckist’s anti-conceptualism and the deeper critique of Jean Baudrillard will perhaps point to limitations within its framework, and offer possibilities to further explore the ideas they raise in the current environment.

Nicholas Bourriaud’s 1998 book *Relational Aesthetics* set out to define what the author saw as a pattern in contemporary art, of artist’s works that took “as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space” (Bourriaud 1998). Rikrit Tiravanija’s work is cited as a prime example in Bourriaud’s writing. Fourteen years ago, Tiravanija’s works were diverse in their execution, utilising printmaking, performance, found objects and myriad other processes (Hirsch 2011). Perhaps though his most well know work is 1992’s “Untitled (Free)” where he set up a makeshift kitchen at 303 Gallery in New York and served the audience the rice and Thai curry he prepared, which has since been restaged numerous times (Stokes 2012).

According to RA, the work is created from the social interaction and participation that comes from sharing a meal. By situating it within a gallery environment, it sets it apart from a simple meal and elevates it to the status of ‘art’, in much the same way as Duchamp’s urinal did (Baudrillard 2005). This creation of an artwork from the raw material of human relationships and interaction seems to be at the core of Bourriaud’s idea of the Relational (Bourriaud 2012). At its most radical it seeks to reclaim a reality alienated

by capitalist consumption and production, by taking real life as its form and de-commodifying it within the framework of art. If this is the case, however, it raises questions about the anti-capitalist credentials of setting up work within the institutionally sanctioned gallery space, and the larger art market (Thomson & Childish 1999). Perhaps, as Claire Bishop notes in *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*, artists like Thomas Hirschorn are indeed more "disruptive" of these relations, more engaged within their environment, though as she notes Hirschorn has since been included in Bourriaud's exhibitions (Bishop 2004).

Though often viewed as separate from RA, another phenomenon of the 90s that claimed to be subverting capitalism from within its sacred cultural consumption spaces was that of the young British artists, or yBa's (Thomson 1999). Backed by Charles Saatchi and legitimised further by the endorsement of the Tate gallery, the two most famous artists to come out from the movement remain Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin.

Perhaps Emin's most famous work, *My Bed* was a nominee for the 1999 Turner prize (Saatchi Gallery 2012). Turning her bed into a sculptural/installation work, it was exhibited along with empty vodka bottles, dirty underwear and associated detritus. Positive responses to the work praised Emin's openness in displaying the good, the ugly and the deeply personal, while critics complained it was shallow, staged and dependent on a slick manipulation of media dynamics for the immense public response it received (Dorment 1999, cited in The Telegraph 2012). Emin, even under adverse circumstances, certainly seems to show a skill in navigating the media. The Stuckist Paul Harvey makes a particularly astute observation of her appearance while heavily intoxicated on a 1997 televised art discussion in England, comparing it to The Sex Pistols' appearance on the Bill Grundy show twenty years previously (Harvey 2012). He comments on the the failed authenticity of Emin's performance; instead of being genuinely controversial, it comes off as an awkward pantomime. Nevertheless, it managed to generate plenty of reportage in the

media, with the author of one article in the Telegraph dryly putting forward Emin's TV appearance as a performance work, her "most significant, certainly her most entertaining, contribution to British art" (Longrigg 1997).

Despite her media savvy, Emin hasn't managed to quite match the international notoriety and financial success of her fellow YBA, Damien Hirst, nor the sheer force of his self-as-brand. Emin's website, *www.emininternational.com*, perhaps says more about this phenomenon, consisting entirely of a shop dedicated to various branded products we can only assume are commissioned, made or signed off on by Emin (Emin International 2012). Hirst's website is more focused on his artwork; an online portfolio rather than a department store (Hirst 2012). Hirst, rather than Emin though, seems best to exemplify the factory production methods popularised by Andy Warhol (Gopnik 2012).

His use of assistants to create his work has been widely reported on. A recent prominent example of this has been his worldwide *Spot Paintings 1986-2011* exhibition, totaling over 1500 paintings and exhibited in all eleven of Larry Gagosian's galleries worldwide (Searle 2012). The works consist of coloured dots of varying sizes, with no colour repeated on the same canvas, the most involved of which contains 25781 spots of a 1mm diameter. They are often titled after legal and illegal pharmaceutical compounds. Perhaps the irony of it being a 'solo' show is that anecdotal reports suggest Hirst may have painted as little as 5 of the pieces (Singh 2012). What is ostensibly the reading of the work –that of death and consumption in the age of mental health prescriptions, and a celebration of colour and painting– has far less impact than the de facto statement it makes on the economics of art and commodification of culture. Hirst, become a post-modern *ubermensch* riding (writing?) the textbook on media tactics, condenses it to a marketable form, achieving the twin goals of money and fame with unparalleled success (Skapinker 2012).

This unabashed flaunting of wealth and notoriety at first seems at odds with Bourriaud's decidedly quieter Relational Artworks, but both rely heavily on the same game of PR, cult of celebrity and the artist as brand in order to generate cultural capital and in turn, new artworks. Hirst's artwork is now about Hirst's artwork, first and foremost (Gopnik 2012, Baudrillard 2005). Other readings of this recent output quickly become secondary, almost background details. Hirst neatly sums up his *Spot Paintings* exhibition in an interview where he talks about his inspiration for holding simultaneous shows in eleven galleries across the world, describing standing in front of a Gagosian calendar that showed the current exhibitions, at what was then nine galleries, and wondering "What if they were all my name?" (Haden-Guest 2012).

In looking at these artworks perhaps it is easy to respond in a cynical and unduly critical way. If all value judgments of the actual work are set aside, it is important to appreciate that their existence and the discussion they have generated have helped to shape the discourse on contemporary art and critical theory. However, the public outcry that often accompanies the exhibition of experimental works cannot be completely dismissed as the unenlightened baying of the mob. If relational art and other similarly opaque contemporary works truly wish to engage people, outside of just those with the education and the involvement in the arts industry required to 'get' the artworks, then perhaps the disagreement of the public deserves to be looked into further .

The Stuckists are a contemporary art movement who explicitly set themselves "against conceptualism, hedonism and the cult of the ego-artist" (Thomson & Childish 1999). Formed in 1999 by British artists Charles Thomson and Billy Childish, the name "Stuckist" was coined by Childish's former partner Tracey Emin, who declared both he and his paintings were "Stuck! Stuck! Stuck!". Their manifesto and Thomson's further writings on "Remodernism" espouse a return to humble picture-making, of art as a process of spiritual self discovery and "thereby enriching society, by giving shared form to individual

experience and an individual form to shared experience"(Thomson & Childish 1999, Thomson 2002). Their roots in the Punk scene of the 1970s often flavours Stuckist works with a certain crass humour, and bluntly anti-establishment messages (Harvey 2005). Since 1999 they have protested the Turner prize several times while wearing clown suits, though perhaps the most famous Stuckist painting is Thomson's *Sir Nicholas Serota Makes An Acquisitions Decision* (Artinfo 2009). It features the titular Tate director contemplating a pair of red women's underwear, with a speech bubble asking "Is it a genuine Emin (£10,000)" with a thought balloon adding "Or a worthless fake?".

Though painted in a way that might be called crude, it is the honesty and authenticity of the work that the Stuckists value (Harvey 2012). This can manifest as a bluntness that often shocks and offends the people who are on the receiving end of their criticism. Some find such an antagonistic approach unappealing, or even downright crass, which might explain why Stuckism is very much a group on the outskirts of contemporary art practice (Harvey 2005).

While the willful naiveté of the Stuckists is often easy to dismiss as childish and reactionary, it is interesting to look at the late writings of Jean Baudrillard on contemporary art, and observe some concurrent themes. In *Contemporary Art: Art Contemporary With Itself*, Baudrillard argues that, beginning with Duchamp's urinal, "under the banner of a general aestheticisation, art has invaded the whole field of reality" (Baudrillard 2005). He explains this further to mean that as art has incorporated the ready made, the photograph, the body and now the very relationships of those at the exhibition, it has withdrawn from its role as illusion, as a representation of *something that it is not,* and instead become only what it is.

In their manifesto, the Stuckists make a similar point;

10. Painting is mysterious. It creates worlds within worlds, giving access to the unseen psychological realities that we inhabit. The results are radically different from the materials employed. An existing object (e.g. a dead sheep) blocks access to the inner world and can only remain part of the physical world it inhabits, be it moorland or gallery. Ready–made art is a polemic of materialism. (Thomson & Childish 1999)

Baudrillard ties materialism and consumption closely with his critique of contemporary art and culture. In *The Conspiracy of Art* he talks of contemporary art as expressing "Nullity", of turning a self-referential nothingness into a marketable form through an absence of meaning, and that it is this absence of meaning that allows this exchange to occur (Baudrillard 2005). This is a theme that has continued through much of his writing, even as far back as 1981 with "The Art Auction", from his book *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (Baudrillard 1981). The same process of ritualised exchange takes place within the gallery space, only now he argues that it is an exchange for an art "asserting nullity, insignificance, meaninglessness, striving for nullity when already null and void" (Baudrillard 2005).

So what does this all mean for contemporary art? It is difficult, if not impossible to make a value judgment on whether an artwork is good or bad. An argument over whether Rikrit Tirawanija's work is Beautiful, or Sublime is, to take Kant's viewpoint, largely subjective, though perhaps it is the universality of human relations that suggests an inherent beauty (Kant 1790). It seems though that much of contemporary art today fails to engage with much of the public, who may be uninterested in art theory but who still want to be engaged by art (Thomson 2002) . Baudrillard's critique of intellectual elitism on the part of an exclusionist art market seems to hit closest to the mark on this point, that a large part of contemporary art is made to appeal to a small audience largely involved in the arts

industry themselves (Baudrillard 2005). Of course, pandering to a middle ground at the expense of experimental and challenging work is hardly a solution either, and we again reach an impasse. Perhaps it is this ability to generate friction that is contemporary art's strength; art collector and film maker John Waters, succinctly puts it thus:

> "Isn't that the job of contemporary art? To infuriate?"
>
> (Waters 2012, quoted by Colluci 2012)

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